

VZCZCXYZ0004
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0059 0281509
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 281509Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4570
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0753
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0341

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000059

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR JORDAN; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/27/2018

TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PREL SY

SUBJECT: SYRIAN GOVERNMENT PREVENTS U.S. CITIZEN FROM
LEAVING COUNTRY

Classified By: CDA Todd C. Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary. The SARG has placed a travel ban on naturalized U.S. citizen and political reformer Bassam Ishak. Ishak, a long-time Embassy contact, is currently weighing his options but may ask the Embassy to intervene on his behalf with the MFA. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Syrian government has prevented Naturalized American citizen and former candidate for Syrian Parliament Bassam Ishak from leaving Syria for the U.S. on January 6 to start a Masters degree course at George Mason University. Ishak said he first became aware of the travel ban in May ¶2007. Before that Ishak asserted he was able to make several previous trips to the U.S. and Canada without any harassment from the security services since his return to Syria in 1995. This time Ishak checked with the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) several days before his trip and was told &no.8 To date Ishak has received no word on the reason behind his travel ban or what he can do to resolve the situation. Each time Ishak has inquired about his case, the security services told him to check back after a few days.

¶3. (C) Ishak believes that Ali Mamluk, head of the GID, ordered the travel ban after sectarian comments during an interfaith conference in 2005 were erroneously attributed to Ishak. Ishak, currently weighing his options, told us that he will continue to work his contacts with the Syrian government as well as consult with his family and other contacts in the U.S., which include members of Congress. Ishak conceded that direct diplomatic pressure from the Embassy could backfire and lead to an indefinite extension of the travel ban. For the time being, Ishak has asked the Embassy to hold off on any official action. In the meantime, he has asked his Amcit brother, a professor at American University, to raise his case with State officers and members of Congress.

¶4. (C) Comment: Ishak's case is, to our knowledge, the first time in recent memory that the SARG has sought to restrict an Amcit from leaving Syria for the political work he has done in Syria. Thus far, Ishak's case has received some local press coverage from pro-reform websites. We have advised Ishak of our readiness to raise his case with the MFA as well as the potential risk that doing so may harden the SARG's position.

¶5. (C) Bio Note: Ishak has been a long-time Embassy contact and supporter of political reform in Syria. Ishak received U.S. citizenship in 1985 while he was studying at American University. His father, Saeed Ishak, was a Syrian parliamentarian for 23 years. Despite his reformist credentials, Ishak, an Assyrian Christian, has conspicuously remained outside the Damascus Declaration and other organized political opposition groups believing that independence would allow him more opportunity to change the existing political system from within. In fact, Ishak ran for Parliament in Hassakeh province in April 2007 elections. Ishak says that he received the most votes but the Ba'ath party manipulated the results to ensure the regime-sponsored "independent" won.

CORBIN